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May 20, 2009

America's Top Philanthropists Hold Private Meeting to Discuss Global Problems

By *Maria Di Mento and Ian Wilhelm*

In a quiet meeting closed to the news media and the public, Bill Gates, David Rockefeller Sr., Oprah Winfrey, and other leading philanthropists met in New York this month to discuss ways to promote charitable giving and make their philanthropy more effective in fighting problems at home and abroad.

The unusual event, which occurred May 5 at Rockefeller University in New York, was an unprecedented gathering of the world's wealthiest — and most generous — people. Together, the philanthropists in the room have committed a total of more than \$72.5-billion to charitable causes since 1996, according to Chronicle of Philanthropy tallies.

While the meeting and its hush-hush nature has triggered intense speculation by the news media about what was discussed, Patricia Q. Stonesifer, former chief executive of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said it was simply a gathering of people who have a common passion for helping others.

"A group of philanthropists came together to discuss their giving," said Ms. Stonesifer, who attended the meeting. "There's really no secret about that. It was an informal get-together and a chance to exchange ideas about what motivates them and what they have learned so far."

"There was an enormous amount of enthusiasm and excitement around their giving and that was a very big part of what they were there for," she added.

Among the high-profile participants were Ted Turner, Warren E. Buffett, George Soros, Peter G. Peterson, Eli Broad, and New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. (All of those philanthropists have appeared at one time on [The Chronicle's ranking](#) of America's most-generous donors.)

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of the guests. Mr. Rockefeller arranged the location — the private Manhattan residence of Rockefeller University's president. (Mr. Rockefeller is an honorary member of the institution's Board of Trustees.)

Ms. Stonesifer, who helped coordinate the meeting, said it started at 3 p.m. and lasted through dinner. Given the personalities in the room, the meeting touched upon a variety of philanthropy topics, said Ms. Stonesifer, who is currently chairwoman of the Smithsonian Institution's Board of Regents.

"It was a wide-ranging conversation," she said, "but they each shared what motivates their giving, their areas of focus of their work, the lessons learned, and thoughts on how we might increase giving."

Indeed, the philanthropic interests represented on that day were rather diverse. For example, Mr. Peterson, co-founder of a private-equity firm, is focused on changing the government's financing of social programs and other fiscal issues, while Ms. Winfrey has primarily given money to education efforts in South Africa and elsewhere.

Ms. Stonesifer — and others who attended the event — declined to say what was specifically talked about. The former Gates foundation leader did say that the attendees are not working on a major collaborative charitable project but do plan to continue to talk to one another.

"It was a really great discussion, and we agreed to continue the dialogue in the future, but there were no specific action items out of the meeting," she said.

With such a powerful guest list, some blog writers have fixated on the meeting as the origins of some international conspiracy. But Ms. Stonesifer objected to the meeting being described as a "secret" event with mysterious intent.

"It was a private gathering. There are often opportunities for each of these individuals to discuss their giving in public — and they often do. But this really was a conversation among friends and colleagues."

She added: "People are automatically curious about these types of things. But they were all quite matter-of-fact about why they were there. It was like a gathering that you and I have, but it was just a different group of friends

